

Measuring the Impact of Community Engagement Strategies with GRCVB Stakeholders

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Table of Contents

<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	1
<i>RESEARCH OBJECTIVES</i>	3
<i>METHODS</i>	3
<i>Data Collection</i>	3
<i>Impacts of COVID-19</i>	4
<i>Data Analysis</i>	4
<i>FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS</i>	6
<i>Objective 1: Stakeholders’ perceptions of tourism’s role in Wake County economic development</i>	6
<i>Objective 2: Stakeholder knowledge of the impacts of tourism in Wake County</i>	12
<i>Objective 3: Stakeholder engagement in advocacy for tourism in Wake County</i>	18
<i>RECOMMENDATIONS</i>	26
<i>REFERENCES</i>	30
<i>APPENDIX 1: Interview Participants</i>	31
<i>APPENDIX 2: Summary Report</i>	33

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INTRODUCTION

A great place to visit is often considered a great place to live, and the greater Raleigh area is no exception. Tourism directly contributes to economic stability, job generation, and quality of life in Wake County. As of 2019, tourism was a significant economic generator contributing to over 28,000 full-time jobs within the community and bringing in \$2.9 billion in direct spending (GRCVB, 2020a). Tourism also directly contributes to the quality of life of Wake County residents through attracting unique events, contributing to transportation networks, and generating investment in local resources (e.g. restaurants, retail, and the arts). These benefits extend to all Wake County residents.

Despite all of the benefits tourism brings to Wake County, tourism, and the work of the Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau (GRCVB) is not recognized for the value it brings to all Wake County stakeholders. This lack of knowledge extends to residents, industry leaders, and decision-makers. Without knowledgeable and impactful advocates communicating the value of the tourism industry, the businesses, employees, and benefits supported by tourism remain vulnerable to decisions made at the local and state level. Decisions such as changes in policy (e.g. short term vacation rental regulation) or reduction of tourism promotion budgets can directly impact a destination's reputation, image, and visitation levels. Wake County needs knowledgeable and dedicated advocates to ensure decision-makers understand the value of tourism and prevent detrimental decisions before they create challenges for the industry.

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven how critical it is for communities to recognize the impacts of tourism. COVID-19 has introduced unprecedented challenges for all Wake County residents, and the tourism industry saw record losses with tourism tax collections down \$20 million and a

loss of \$150 million in tourism spending from groups as of December 2020 (GRCVB, 2020b). But with restaurants closing, businesses struggling, and event cancelations, residents are recognizing the benefits tourism brings to Wake County and the impact that it has had on the community. Now is a uniquely opportune time to communicate the value of tourism to stakeholders and empower them to continue to be advocates for the industry even after the COVID-19 pandemic ends.

Through proactive education, committed collaboration, and compelling communication the GRCVB can empower stakeholders to become dedicated tourism advocates. Community engagement strategies (CES) are one effective way to engage directly with stakeholders. These strategies include one-on-one meetings with stakeholders, PR campaigns, and public meetings with representatives from different sectors of tourism, other industries, non-profit organizations, economic development offices, etc. The GRCVB has recognized that CES can be an effective tool in building relationships with Wake County stakeholders. In 2020 they implemented Tourism U, a presentation to educate Wake County stakeholders on the GRCVB's work and tourism's impact on Wake County. This community engagement strategy is designed to cultivate tourism advocates among community stakeholders by increasing their awareness of the GRCVB and the benefits tourism brings to Wake County. However, the impact of CES is not known. This study will determine the degree to which CES create awareness of tourism and its benefits in Wake County and empower stakeholders to advocate for tourism.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are to understand community stakeholders’:

- 1.) *Perceptions* of tourism’s role in Wake County economic development
- 2.) *Knowledge* of the impacts of tourism in Wake County
- 3.) *Engagement* in advocacy for tourism in Wake County

Interviews will be conducted before (pre-CES) and after (post-CES) the implementation of Tourism U to address how CES can influence these three community stakeholder attributes. Identifying differences in these attributes before and after implementing Tourism U will reveal its impact on stakeholders’ knowledge and perceptions of tourism in Wake County and their intention to advocate for tourism in Wake County.

METHODS

Data Collection

The GRCVB identified 40 community stakeholders who the research team invited to participate in the study via email and/or phone. These stakeholders were selected to represent a variety of sectors within and adjacent to the tourism industry (Table 1). Pre-CES interviews were conducted July - September of 2019 with 22 stakeholders (Table 1). From September-November 2020 the GRCVB invited a wide range of stakeholders to participate in Tourism U. GRCVB staff members Andrew Baker, Karen DeSollar, and Jonathan Freeze delivered the Tourism U presentation to a total of 45 stakeholders. Within one week of their participation in Tourism U these stakeholders were invited via email to participate in a post-CES interview. Post-CES interviews were conducted from September-November 2020 with 12 stakeholders (Table 1) (across 10 interviews, some interviews included multiple participants). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to generate data for thematic analysis.

Impacts of COVID-19

COVID-19 presented a number of challenges for this study, most notably the attrition of participants from pre-CES interviews to post-CES interviews. Pre-CES interviews were conducted from before the beginning of the pandemic. Many pre-CES interview participants were unable to attend Tourism U, had left their position due to the pandemic, or could not commit to a second interview. While this presented challenges and constraints, the study remained flexible to the changing times and was successful in collecting significant data despite these limitations. The researcher acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant paradigm shift in the current world and therefore is likely to influence different views in the post data.

Data Analysis

To address the research objectives the data were analyzed to reveal themes associated with stakeholders': *Perceptions* of the tourism's role in Wake County economic development; *Knowledge* of the impacts of tourism in Wake County; and *Engagement* in advocacy for tourism in Wake County. In order to assess the influence of Tourism U on these stakeholder attributes all of the pre-CES data were analyzed in aggregate as were the post-CES data. Rather than comparing pre/post data on an individual basis, the use of aggregated data revealed changes in themes related to the attributes across the entire sample. This provides a more comprehensive picture of how Tourism U influenced these stakeholder attributes.

Analysis was conducted using the pre-CES interview data first, revealing a variety of themes associated with these three stakeholder attributes. Analysis was then conducted using the post-CES interview data using both the themes identified in the pre-CES data and new themes that emerged from the post-CES data. These new themes in the post-CES data were also applied to

the pre-CES data to ensure that all aspects of the three community stakeholder attributes were accounted for. Ultimately, themes from the pre-CES data and post-CES data were compared to reveal whether differences in community stakeholders' attributes.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The following subsections provide evidence of themes related to each of the three study objectives. Themes of findings are presented for pre-CES interviews or post-CES interviews, as well as themes that were represented in both interviews. Key findings are bolded and supporting evidence from the interview data is included as direct quotes beneath the findings. A conclusion subsection is provided for each objective where key conclusions are bolded based upon the comparison of pre-CES and post-CES findings.

Objective 1: Stakeholders' perceptions of tourism's role in Wake County economic development

Pre-CES Findings

Data from pre-CES interview participants revealed that **stakeholders' perceive tourism as a positive economic driver** for Wake County (Quote 1). This indicates that there is a baseline knowledge and comprehension of the role of tourism in economic development within Wake County.

Quote 1: "All of us experience some level of benefit from tourism as a community. Again, the tourism dollar goes a long way across the community... Our restaurants and small businesses, in close proximity to these large assets, see a lot of that impact." - Economic Development, Wake Forest

Stakeholders recognize specific economic development actions led by the GRCVB (Quote 2).

These actions included attracting, marketing, and/or sustaining cultural events, sporting events, conferences and conventions, restaurants, and the downtown areas of the 12 Wake County communities.

Quote 2: “[The GRCVB is] intimately involved in working with NC State on NCAA bids...

They attend a lot of conferences to recruit people, whether it be event planners or whoever, to bring their events our way.” - Sport, Raleigh

Beyond promoting these specific actions for economic development, many stakeholders emphasized the **importance of marketing** Wake County to encourage economic development directly and indirectly related to tourism (Quote 3).

Quote 3: “The GRCVB has done an incredible job of marketing our city. More so, I think it is probably more important than any efforts by [the County’s] Economic Development [office].

It’s getting the word out. [The County’s] Economic Development [office] is not getting the stories written in the Financial Times every week about Raleigh.” - Tourism Sector:

Attraction, Morrisville

While such findings suggest that the GRCVB has already cultivated considerable knowledge about tourism’s role in economic development among stakeholders there was evidence that greater efforts are needed to expand this understanding to others. Pre-CES interview participants felt that **increased support from the GRCVB for existing economic development activities** could achieve this broader understanding by expanding existing activities’ impact (Quote 4).

Quote 4: “Maybe that could be a partnership with the local [organizations] and the towns... working together to figure out if we want the GRCVB to help us define our area to make it, like I said, the crown jewel.” - Economic Development, Apex

A strategy to diversify stakeholders who recognize the role of tourism in economic development would be to **expand promotional efforts in Wake County's smaller communities** (Quote 5). Pre-CES interview participants felt that the GRCVB could build upon the promotional strategies used for Raleigh and Wake County (as illustrated in Quote 3) to feature smaller communities in the county that would benefit from increased economic development through tourism. By playing a more active role in promoting these communities the GRCVB could illustrate the role of tourism in economic development to a more diverse range of stakeholders.

Quote 5: "I would like to see more of that [support with promoting events and attractions] and maybe if they were hosting, say, journalists that didn't just want to focus on Raleigh, I'd be very happy to be included in that, and offer some activities if they wanted to travel a little bit."

- Municipal Government, Wendell

Post-CES Findings

Data from post-CES interview participants revealed that stakeholders understand that **a great place to visit is also a great place to live** (Quote 6). They see that tourism generates opportunities for visitors to see the quality of life in Wake County, which attracts them to relocate or open businesses in the area. These businesses in turn, create sustainable job options for the residents of the community.

Quote 6: "Economic impact, the impact of having people that may not have been here before that come [and] decide, 'You know what? That's a great city, I want to go live there'." -

Tourism Sector: Hospitality, Raleigh

Tourism is seen as vital to the health of the community (Quote 7). This demonstrates there is a broader understanding of tourism's role in the overall strength of the county's economy and the vitality of the community.

Quote 7: “Tourism is vital to our community...It's a huge part of our economic growth, our ability to sustain ourselves. It's part of the blood that keeps us going.”- Tourism Sector: Hospitality, Raleigh

While the interviewed stakeholders could identify the connection between tourism and economic development, they recognized the need to **help residents understand the full economic value of tourism**. Participants pointed out that residents may not connect tourism jobs and revenue to the benefits they see on a daily basis (Quote 8). They suggest the GRCVB needs to increase efforts to show residents the connection between their quality of life and tourism.

Quote 8: “I don't think that people know all the connections, particularly the economic connections [to tourism]...what does that pay for? How does it get funded? What are the amenities that are beneficiaries of all that? What do they do? How does that help me? What's the benefit to me? If you asked the rest of people that, obviously, there's a gap in understanding where you would ideally want people and where they actually are.” - Tourism Sector: Attraction, Morrisville

Data can effectively communicate and quantify tourism's contribution to Wake County's economic development. But post-CES interview participants pointed out the **importance of contextualizing data** (Quote 9).

Quote 9: “In some ways, what's more compelling than just the data points that 2019 was a year of record tourism, and those households saved X number of dollars, is that over the last 10 years because tourism has grown by X because the tax base has grown by Y, people are now saving X dollars versus what they used to save.” - Arts, Raleigh

Contextualizing data was seen as an important element of educating stakeholders on the impacts of tourism, particularly for residents of Wake County who would likely be unfamiliar with trends in tourism data over time.

Conclusions

A comparison of the pre-CES and post-CES findings related to Objective 1 revealed that Tourism U contributed to **a deeper understanding of tourism’s role in economic development in Wake County**. Pre-CES interview data revealed that stakeholders could identify the relationship between tourism and economic development in Wake County. Furthermore, they saw GRCVB’s role in advancing that relationship through marketing efforts and stewardship of various events in the county. After participating in Tourism U stakeholders demonstrated a more nuanced comprehension of the tourism’s role in economic development. They emphasized the importance of tourism's role in the area’s excellent quality of life and credited tourism to attracting future residents and business owners.

Tourism U also generated a **broader view of how GRCVB should improve knowledge of tourism’s role in economic development in Wake County**. In pre-CES interviews stakeholders described strategies for the GRCVB to improve knowledge of tourism’s role in economic

development in Wake County that focused specifically on their organization or community. In post-CES interviews there was more conversation about strategies to spread knowledge of tourism's role in economic development in Wake County to different types of stakeholders, namely Wake County residents. This suggests that Tourism U communicates the value of increasing knowledge of tourism's role in economic development in Wake County.

Objective 2: Stakeholder knowledge of the impacts of tourism in Wake County

Pre-CES Findings

Pre-CES interview data illustrates that **stakeholders have a good understanding of how tourism benefits the quality of life in Wake County**. They recognize that tourism supports the resources unique to Wake County (e.g. small businesses, universities, sports, events, culinary arts) and demonstrates that a great place to visit is a great place to live (Quote 10).

Quote 10: “It's part of attracting people to live here as well eventually. You come see everything. You'll love it. Then people decide to live here... We're getting about 60 or so new residents in the county every day. Having those events, conventions, helping to create that sense of place here, having amenities for people to experience.” - Economic Development, Rolesville

While pre-CES stakeholders could identify positive impacts of tourism (Quote 10), they also recognized negative impacts related to transportation challenges like limited public transit connectivity between communities in Wake County and traffic congestion. **Stakeholders see a need to move towards more sustainable transportation options** (Quote 11) to address these challenges.

Quote 11: “It doesn't even occur to me to use the bus because it's just not part of the culture of the city. To me, I think the GRCVB could play a big role in shifting that mindset and shifting that culture, so that is something we all do. It's not just their job but I think they could have a lot to do with it.” - Arts, Raleigh

Post-CES Findings

Post-CES interviews expanded upon what was discussed in the post-CES interviews, with stakeholders voicing a **clear connection between quality of life in Wake County and tourism**. They articulate this by speaking more explicitly about the value of tourism to the community (Quote 12).

Quote 12: “Tourism raises the value of a destination in everyone's eyes. It gives the locals a reason to value and cherish the things that they have and give them an opportunity to build, whether infrastructure or murals, to create more spaces with the tax money from tourism.” - Economic Development, Zebulon

This represents a change from a ‘heads in beds’ mentality often used to one that embodies tourism as the heartbeat of the community. In fact multiple post-CES participants used language to describe tourism as the “heart” of the community (Quote 13).

Quote 13: “Tourism is almost like the heart, and then everything goes back out into the other appendages. It's the heartbeat.” - Business Development, Zebulon

While there is evidence of greater recognition for the positive impacts of tourism after the Tourism U presentation stakeholders also raised concerns about potential for negative impacts of tourism, specifically **challenges around gentrification and affordable housing** (Quote 14).

Quote 14: “A lot of people will see growth as negative... Specifically with the African American business community... [people] say ‘This used to be this kind of business.’” - Municipal Government, Wendell

Stakeholders emphasis on these potentially negative impacts of tourism expansion in Wake County represents a topic that the GRCVB should be mindful of and address in communications with stakeholders.

Post-CES interviews also revealed a noticeable **emphasis on highlighting how tourism impacts service workers** (Quote 15).

Quote 15: “[Front line employees] put a face on Raleigh. They market our culture, our environment, the people of the city, the hospitality.” - Tourism Sector: Hospitality, Raleigh

Stakeholders recognize that tourism directly impacts those at the heart of the industry, specifically service workers. They recommend the GRCVB actively put a face to the tourism workforce and integrate those more personal stories into their narrative around Wake County tourism. With the magnitude of jobs lost during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is especially important to showcase the people who make tourism possible (Quote 16). In this time of recovery, it is essential to showcase the individuals at the heart of the industry and how they impact the tourism industry.

Quote 16: “Especially now, enlightening and lifting [tourism employees] up through marketing... We're not marketing the uber-successful or the big business...we're also supporting our community and this is what makes the community, the people who live here. I'd like to see more marketing around that in the future. Everyday person who lives in Raleigh, everyday Wake County residents know that's what makes us, us.” - Municipal Government, Wendell

Findings Consistent Across Pre and Post-CES interviews

Across both the pre-and post-CES interviews stakeholders expressed **the need to improve resident understanding of tourism’s impacts**. This goes beyond communicating the economic value of tourism to residents, described in Objective 1, reflecting that stakeholders want residents to recognize how tourism positively impacts their quality of life (Quote 17).

Quote 17: “The average citizen sees the least benefit [of tourism], just because they don't understand. I don't know that they don't receive the benefit, but I don't think that they probably recognize the value that, in terms of the offset of their taxes and quality of lives, that they get as a result of it.” - Tourism Sector: Transportation, Wake County

Residents may not recognize the tourism impacts they experience (both economically and with quality of life). This indicates a need to **develop strategies for how to effectively educate residents** on why tourism is so essential to their quality of life (Quote 18).

Quote 18: “[The GRCVB has] the story, and they've got the content in terms of the economic impact to local citizens or why it's beneficial in terms of infrastructure they're building as well. They tell a big story. The bigger question is what's the strategy to reach the average citizen at the end of the day?” - Tourism Sector: Transportation, Wake County

Conclusions

A comparison of the pre-CES and post-CES findings related to Objective 2 revealed that Tourism U contributed to **stakeholders making a more direct connection between tourism quality of life in Wake County**. Pre-CES interview data revealed that stakeholders had a good understanding of how tourism benefits residents of Wake County by highlighting many cultural

resources such as events, restaurants, and small businesses. They emphasized that generating tourism is not only beneficial for raising the profile of Wake County as a destination but also contributes to making Wake County a great place to live. After participating in Tourism U, stakeholders demonstrated a more comprehensive understanding of the positive impacts of tourism and a more explicit understanding of what tourism brings to residents of the community.

Tourism U led stakeholders to first think more deeply about positive impacts, shifting their emphasis on tourism as good for quality of life to tourism as the heart of the community. There is also expanded knowledge about the potential negative impacts of tourism such as gentrification and affordable housing. This shift demonstrates that **stakeholders are thinking actively about tourism's impact in a more nuanced way**. These challenging impacts present an opportunity for the GRCVB to communicate to stakeholders, particularly Wake County residents, the strategies they use to maximize tourism's positive impacts and minimize its negative impacts. Data showed that stakeholders continue to recognize the importance of expanding residents' understanding of tourism impacts. This suggests that the GRCVB should draw upon this suggestion from stakeholders to expand their efforts in educating residents about tourism impacts.

Tourism U and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic **primed stakeholders to think about the individual members of the tourism industry**, specifically frontline employees. They see a clear connection between how tourism industry workers within the community are directly impacted by the tourism industry's success. Evidence from the post-CES interviews suggests that

the GRCVB should continue to consider frontline employees both important stakeholders and examples of those who are most directly impacted by tourism.

Objective 3: Stakeholder engagement in advocacy for tourism in Wake County

Pre-CES Findings

Pre-CES interviews revealed three stakeholder groups that the GRCVB can cultivate as advocates for tourism in Wake County. There are current supporters, interested stakeholders, and potential partners, each group has a different level of commitment to engage in advocacy for tourism in Wake County. Pre-CES data revealed that **current supporters of the GRCVB are ready to advocate for tourism** (Quote 19).

Quote 19: “[The GRCVB is] a great resource, and they also understand the value of [my organization]. I feel like we're always great partners in whatever we're trying to accomplish. I've invited folks from CVB to be speakers... [A staff member] came over and talked about the airport as an amenity for us, and as a driver for that economic development activity that we see.” - Economic Development, Morrisville

This indicates that the GRCVB has an existing base of stakeholders who are currently engaging in advocacy (as seen in the example of inviting GRCVB staff members to speak in quote 20) or can be readily activated. In pre-CES interviews stakeholders identified a need for the GRCVB to continue to foster strong relationships with current supporters and **capitalize on interested stakeholders’ appetite to build relationships** with the GRCVB (Quote 20).

Quote 20: “I think I need to be more in touch with them more on projects. I would love to be involved a lot more with them and kind of see that effort moving forward... Being involved on committees, boards, emailing me with project ideas, or if they wanted to collaborate on something, being more involved in that.” - Municipal Government, Wendell

Capitalizing on interested stakeholders' desire to engage with the GRCVB could convert them to supporters who are ready to advocate for tourism in Wake County. While Quote 21 shows evidence of there being untapped interest in engaging with the GRCVB among some stakeholders there is also evidence that **greater efforts should be made to educate potential partners**, those stakeholders who may currently be unaware of tourism's value but who could be activated as advocates for tourism in Wake County with greater knowledge of the GRCVB's role and tourism's impact on Wake County (Quote 21).

Quote 21: "You have some businesses who know [GRCVB staff] personally and are really engaged, and some who have barely any awareness that they exist other than most cities have one, but don't have a connection." - Economic Development, Raleigh

Actively engaging with different types of stakeholders, like leaders in the county's communities outside of Raleigh (as seen in Quote 20) or industries adjacent to tourism (e.g. health care, real estate) (as seen in Quote 21), will diversify the GRCVB's base of supporters who can be activated as advocates for tourism in Wake County.

To effectively maintain existing relationships with stakeholders and develop new ones the GRCVB needs to **actively engage with stakeholders to understand their needs**. Pre-CES interview participants indicated this engagement should be consistent and should provide space for stakeholders to share opportunities and challenges that they want the GRCVB to address. In Quote 22 an interview participant provides an example of this engagement strategy by proposing an annual meeting between the GRCVB and their members.

Quote 22: "It would give [the GRCVB] an opportunity to get an update on our communities

and how we think. We could work together...It's like a win win. The [organization] executives find out what's going on but then also [the GRCVB] gets that pulse on what's going on in the community. I think that would be really helpful and maybe even start at once a year initially.” - Economic Development, Apex

Pre-CES interview participants noted that these engagement efforts must **reflect the diversity of Wake County’s tourism industry**. Participants acknowledge the challenge the GRCVB faces with having to represent multiple communities across Wake County as well as all the sectors of tourism and tourism-adjacent industries. But there was evidence that efforts to ensure all communities and interests were given equal opportunities to engage with the GRCVB would yield further commitment to advocate for tourism in Wake County (Quote 23).

Quote 23: “Only because [economic impact data are] mostly Wake County and not necessarily Garner... If there's a way that we had someone on staff, or through the CVB, to be able to communicate the economic impact that happens with parks and recreation events, festivals, tournaments and what that generates in the local community... We don't have anybody to say we do that. If that's something that they could help us communicate, I think that'd be a great tool for us to continue advocating.” - Municipal Government, Garner

Quote 23 comes from one of the county’s smaller communities and reflects interest in engaging with the GRCVB in efforts to communicate the impact of tourism in that community. By providing resources to assist with this communication, as well as other requests similar to this from other stakeholders who represent the diversity of Wake County, the GRCVB can build or maintain the relationships with stakeholders needed to activate them as advocates.

Post-CES Findings

Post-CES data revealed that after participating in Tourism U stakeholders have an improved understanding of why they should advocate for tourism in Wake County. Post-CES interview participants demonstrated an **understanding that the success of tourism and of the GRCVB generates benefits for stakeholders** throughout Wake County (Quote 24).

Quote 24: “I depend a lot on [the GRCVB’s] success... I make sure that they're getting the tools and the resources that they need in whatever way I can...I want to make sure that I'm involved with the rest of the businesses in the community and making sure that we're all supporting their effort because it is important to not just my hotel, but to the people that work for me and the other hotels, the people of the community.” - Tourism Sector: Hospitality, Raleigh

In addition to motivating stakeholders to advocate for tourism in Wake County there is evidence that Tourism U prompted participants to think about what resources they needed to be successful advocates. Post-CES interview participants described a need for a **consistent message for advocates to share** (Quote 25).

Quote 25: “If [the GRCVB has] taglines or stories, please share those...I always think we need to have one voice, or one message. It could be in different voices, but share the same message.” - Business Development, Raleigh

Participants felt that speaking with a unified voice about tourism in Wake County would make them more effective advocates. They also noted a need for **actionable information to help advocates communicate the value of tourism in Wake county**. This actionable information

includes data to support the consistent message and clear talking points to guide advocates efforts in communications with decision-makers or other stakeholders (Quote 26).

Quote 26: “We need talking points. We need actionable information if we're going to be partners if we're going to get anything out of this.” - Arts, Raleigh

Post-CES interview participants who recognize their potential advocacy role also expect the GRCVB to provide them with a **specific ask that aligns with stakeholders’ strengths and potential audience** (Quote 27).

Quote 27: “[The GRCVB] should probably evaluate all their different partners ... and try to figure out where do they best support the organization. Are they a spokesperson for economic development activity? Are they behind the scenes working with elected officials regarding investment strategies that need to be made to support the CVB? Is it advocacy at the grassroots level... as to why they need to vote for a referendum?" - Tourism Sector:
Transportation, Wake County

As described in quote 27 the ask (i.e. the specific message to deliver/action to take) needs to be tailored to the stakeholder and their sphere of influence (i.e. who they can access in their personal network). These asks should be supported with actionable information and should align with the consistent message being delivered by all advocates.

Post-CES interview participants also pointed out that **advocacy requires reciprocity**. There was evidence that if a stakeholder acts as an advocate for tourism in Wake County, they will seek reciprocal support from the GRCVB (Quote 28).

Quote 28: “I think when they're [making an advocacy ask], at the exact same time, the CVB should do the same exact thing back to the business partner and describe to them, ‘Here's how we think we can help you.’” - Tourism Sector: Transportation, Wake County

Findings Consistent Across Pre and Post-CES interviews

A common theme across both pre and post-CES data was the benefits of effective communication with tourism stakeholders. This begins with understanding and **adapting to each stakeholder’s communication preferences** (Quote 29).

Quote 29: “There's not one best way to communicate with everyone. Everybody has their own separate way of receiving information.” - Municipal Government, Garner

By communicating effectively with stakeholders the GRCVB will be able to develop them as advocates, who can in turn amplify an advocacy message to other stakeholders. Thus, **effective communication creates an advocacy “ripple effect”** that will increase awareness of tourism’s value across Wake County (Quote 30).

Quote 30: “When the elected officials are aware of that it usually trickles down. If the elected officials know something then they know the advocate [and the] staff will end up knowing... When [the elected officials] tell their story, if they are able to communicate something about GRCVB, then without doubt it's for the citizens... [This] creates a funnel that is not one way, but they're an element to disperse the information on multiple paths.” - Economic Development, Apex

Conclusions

A comparison of the pre-CES and post-CES findings related to Objective 3 revealed that Tourism U **activated stakeholders to consider the specific resources they need to be successful advocates** for tourism in Wake County. Pre-CES interviews revealed that stakeholders are at different stages of readiness to engage in advocacy for tourism (i.e. some are currently ready, some are interested, and some have potential but need greater education). In post-CES interviews most participants went beyond describing their readiness to advocate for tourism to describe what was necessary for them to be effective as advocates. Specifically, they are seeking: a consistent message to share, actionable data to support the message, and a targeted ask that aligns with actions they can take to influence members of their social network. The noticeable shift in the focus of participants' conversations about advocacy--from interest to action--indicates that Tourism U was effective in garnering greater commitment to advocacy for tourism in Wake County.

Evidence from both the pre- and post-CES interviews indicates that the GRCVB needs to actively sustain relationships with potential advocates. In order to encourage advocacy for tourism among stakeholders the **GRCVB needs to develop targeted stakeholder engagement strategies**, which are tailored to the stakeholders' level of readiness to advocate. These strategies should focus on listening to stakeholders needs, seeking an understanding of how they may expect the GRCVB to reciprocate in advocacy efforts, and assessing the spheres of influence for each stakeholder in order to match the appropriate advocacy ask with their strengths. These engagement strategies also need to align with the stakeholders preferred methods of communication.

Lastly, the pre- and post-CES interviews emphasize **the importance of diversifying advocates for tourism in Wake County**. By sustaining relationships with stakeholders who represent different communities, interests (e.g. tourism-adjacent industries, municipalities, economic development, cultural or natural resources), and roles (e.g. industry leaders, employees, residents) the GRCVB not only can address these stakeholders' needs, but can also lay the foundation for activating them as advocates for tourism in Wake County. A diverse set of advocates will generate diverse spheres of influence, meaning advocates can educate a wider audience on the value of tourism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were developed based upon a synthesis of the findings and conclusions for each of the study objectives. Collectively these recommendations are designed to help the GRCVB: improve stakeholders' perceptions of tourism's role in Wake County economic development; increase stakeholders' knowledge of the impacts of tourism in Wake County; and encourage stakeholder engagement in advocacy for tourism in Wake County.

Recommendations 1 - 3 focus on additional CES (beyond Tourism U) the GRCVB can utilize to diversify and expand the pool of stakeholders who can be activated as advocates for tourism in Wake County. Recommendations 4 - 6 are management actions that the GRCVB can take to create an infrastructure that supports CES including Tourism U.

Recommendation 1: Focus stakeholder engagement efforts on one Wake County community (outside of Raleigh) each month--communicate with their local leaders, host events to connect with partners, and showcase their assets in internal and external GRCVB communications. Study findings reveal that activating advocates for tourism requires consistent relationship building efforts. Potential advocates want the chance to communicate their needs to the GRCVB and hear updates on how tourism is impacting their communities and advancing economic development. While it is crucial to have mechanisms available for stakeholders to connect with the GRCVB throughout the year, dedicating one month to each of the County's twelve communities to dive deeper into relationship-building efforts will ensure that there is equal opportunity for these communities to connect with the GRCVB. Focusing on community leaders, tourism sector partners, and members of tourism-adjacent industries (e.g. real estate, health care) in each of these communities will help the GRCVB educate potential partners and convert them to supporters who are ready to advocate for tourism in Wake County. This will

diversify the pool of advocates for tourism and generate more opportunities to create an advocacy “ripple effect”, meaning more stakeholders will be educated about the value of tourism in Wake County.

Recommendation 2: Expand efforts to educate residents about the value of tourism in Wake County by implementing programs to reach younger residents and their parents as well as new residents. Study findings revealed that current stakeholders (particularly those in different tourism sectors, economic development, or municipal government) see a need to expand knowledge of tourism’s impacts and role in economic development to Wake County residents. Educating residents could take many forms but one that could reach two audiences - young residents and their parents - would be adapting Tourism U to a classroom setting. Teaching young residents about tourism’s impacts can allow that knowledge to “trickle up” to their parents. This could be augmented with additional educational campaigns focused on long-term and new residents which communicate not only the economic benefits of tourism (e.g. tax savings) but also the impact tourism has on quality of life in Wake County.

Recommendation 3: Amplify the importance of tourism workforce members. Evidence from post-CES interviews revealed that stakeholders recognize the value of the tourism workforce, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. By highlighting tourism workforce members’ value to the industry, through promotional campaigns or recognition events, the GRCVB can demonstrate that they support these individuals and establish the relationships needed to activate them as advocates for tourism in Wake County. Having tourism workforce

members as advocates for the industry would provide valuable insight into how policy changes or decisions will impact those whose livelihoods depend on tourism.

Recommendation 4: Establish and maintain an Advocate Relationship Management

system. Study findings revealed the importance of sustaining relationships with stakeholders in order to activate them as advocates. Sustaining these relationships requires that GRCVB staff to account for attributes such as stakeholders' level of readiness to advocate for tourism, communication preferences, expectations for advocacy reciprocity, and sphere of influence (i.e. who they can access in their personal network). The GRCVB can maximize their ability to sustain these stakeholder relationships by treating them the same as a customer relationship.

Akin to a Customer Relationship Management system, an Advocate Relationship Management (ARM) system would allow the GRCVB to document stakeholders' attributes, their participation in/exposure to CES, and past advocacy efforts. An ARM would allow the GRCVB to maximize the effectiveness of their communication with stakeholders and track when stakeholders should be invited to participate in additional CES.

Recommendation 5: Charge a committee with creating an annual advocacy plan.

Comprised of GRCVB staff and board members, this committee should annually identify advocacy needs, create an “ask” for those needs (e.g. speak directly to city council members about improving transportation networks), and organize the resources (e.g. data, talking points) for advocates to act on those asks. Committee members can use the ARM to determine the best strategy for communicating with each stakeholder about their assigned ask and needed resources. By establishing a plan that works in conjunction with the ARM the GRCVB can ensure that their

advocacy needs are being addressed by advocates who have the most potential to be successful. The creation of an advocacy plan and assigning resources (i.e. staff and board members' time) also formalizes the GRCVB's commitment to proactive advocacy efforts.

Recommendation 6: Maintain and expand Tourism U as a Community Engagement

Strategy. A comparison of the pre- and post-CES interviews revealed that Tourism U, in conjunction with the current challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and social justice movements, influences stakeholders' perceptions of tourism's role in economic development, knowledge of tourism's impacts, and intentions to engage in advocacy for tourism. This suggests that the GRCVB should maintain their commitment to delivering Tourism U. They should seek to deliver the 100 level presentation to new stakeholder groups and should follow up with the 200 level presentation to those who are ready to engage with more complex issues and engage in conversations about their advocacy potential. It should be noted that the 200 level of Tourism U may be a better context for discussion of topics such as the interlocal funds, as there was very little change in knowledge or discussion of this in post-CES interviews. The implementation of an ARM and annual advocacy plan will also help to tailor the Tourism U presentation to different stakeholder audiences. For example, the 100 level presentation could focus on impacts for a specific community and conclude with basic asks for members of the audience to initiate their advocacy efforts. A capstone Tourism U discussion (300 level) could entail the stakeholder inviting elected officials, decisions-makers, or other stakeholders to participate in small discussions about the value of tourism in Wake County.

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APPENDIX 1: Interview Participants

Table 1

Interview Participants

Participant	Stakeholder Category	Location	Pre-CES Interview	Post-CES Interview
1	Tourism Sector: Attraction	Morrisville	X	X
2	Tourism Sector: Transportation	Wake County	X	X
3	Economic Development	Wake Forest	X	
4	Economic Development	Raleigh	X	
5	Sport	Raleigh	X	
6	Tourism Sector: Hospitality	Raleigh	X	
7	Entrepreneurship	Raleigh	X	
8	Retail	Raleigh	X	
9	Other Industry: Health Care	Raleigh	X	
10	Tourism Sector: Hospitality	Raleigh	X	
11	Higher Education	Raleigh	X	
12	Arts	Raleigh	X	
13	Municipal Government	Wendell	X	X
14	Municipal Government	Rolesville	X	
15	Economic Development	Wake County	X	
16	Municipal Government	Garner	X	
17	Tourism Sector: Food and Beverage	Raleigh	X	
18	Retail	Raleigh	X	
19	Arts	Raleigh	X	

20	Economic Development	Morrisville	X	
21	Economic Development	Apex	X	
22	Other Industry: Real Estate	Raleigh	X	
23	Arts	Raleigh		X
24	Economic Development	Apex		X
25	Other Industry: Insurance	Rolesville		X
26	Tourism Sector: Hospitality	Raleigh		X
27	Arts	Raleigh		X
28	Arts	Raleigh		X
29	Arts	Raleigh		X
30	Tourism Sector: Attraction	Morrisville		X
31	Economic Development	Zebulon		X

APPENDIX 2: Summary Report

The following report is designed to be a summary of key study findings that can be shared as a stand-alone material. It was written to appeal to a public audience so that the findings of this study can be shared more widely.